"See Yourself at the Library"

Celebrating the Common Threads
while
Respecting the Differences.

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Abstract

Today’s communities are diverse in composition, not only ethnically, but also in matters of age, sexual preference, physical and mental ability. However, as different as we all are, there are certain common threads that bind us all together. If libraries are to thrive and serve the whole community, they must respect the differences, but at the same time, celebrate those things we all have in common. The library should be a place where the community can gather. Patrons should feel that they are a part of the library and have a stake in its future. To this end, I have created the “See Yourself at the Library” promotion.

Introduction

Serving the entire community, making sure that each person who walks through the doors feels welcome, ensuring that people feel connected; these are the goals that libraries must strive to meet. Diversity in the library is about recognizing all members of the community, realizing that each individual is unique. Writing for the *Federal Lawyer,* Arthur L. Burnett Sr. stated, "…we emphasize the worth of the individual, and we stress not divisiveness but unity, harmony, and mutual respect for the content of the character and the capability of the individual …" (Burnett, 2003) Burnett may have speaking about the law but his words hold true for libraries as well.

Nor, in the name of diversity, should librarians seek to categorize people by ethnic backgrounds. For if we divide people into these groups, are we not missing something? For within each ethnic group there are old, young, single, mentally or physically challenged, gay, lesbian, etc. Ghada Etturk urges us to: "Think of people as individuals and not as representative of the culture they come from." (Etturk, 2003)

In the light of these challenges how are libraries to reach out to the community? How do they plan promotions that will appeal to the majority without antagonizing or rejecting a minority group? Perhaps the answer is to plan promotions around the seasons. The purpose of this paper is to look at ways that libraries can reach out to their diverse populations and make them feel "a part of" the library. Specifically, I have outlined a promotion I call, "See Yourself at the Library".

Diversity of Community

America has always been a land of diversity. We pride ourselves on our "rugged individualism. Gandhi states that "…diversity is a major building block; a cornerstone principle of a successful democracy." (Gandhi 2000) Thus, rather than looking at cultural diversity as a problem, it should be viewed as an asset. How do libraries tap into this asset? To begin we must establish who resides in our community. It is simple when trying to determine the makeup of a neighborhood to focus on the multiculturalism aspect. How easy it is, to go to the last census report and pull up the demographics of the area. However, this does not measure the diversity of the area. As Anita Steele puts it:

> "Diversity is both more expansive and inclusive than the multicultural approach. It encompasses people of varied abilities as well as varied backgrounds. A study of world languages might include American Sign Language as well as Swahili and Greek….Diversity also recognizes differences without aggrandizing or judging them…" (Steele, 1995)

Libraries have a responsibility to the entire community. "Beyond the bonds of race and ethnicity, libraries are obligated to honor the information needs of people with physical disabilities, different sexual orientation, and barriers on account of language, social strata, or age." (Gandhi, 2000) If libraries are to honor these obligations then we need to create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable and want to visit. Barbara Clubb describes it as, "a place where we connect with others, as a neutral ground where people from different walks of life in the community can meet and get to know one another." (Clubb, 2005)

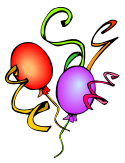
However, before libraries can create this atmosphere, they have to know their community. What churches are in the neighborhood? How many schools are there, and

what ages do they serve? Are there ethnic neighborhoods, grocery stores, or retail establishments? Where are the senior centers or retirement homes? What day care centers are near by? Are there services for the disabled? Libraries need to know the community they are entrusted to serve. To be successful, they must build public will in their favor. Eric Friedwalk-Fishman in his article, "Building Public Will" states:

> "Public will building is a powerful approach to creating sustainable change that ensures libraries are viewed as critical to vibrant, healthy communities. The process attracts and enlists committed champions and ambassadors who are moved to conviction, whose conviction becomes action, and whose action garners the conviction and action of others. As change occurs, evaluation and reinforcement support the efforts of early adopter converting them to ambassadors. Ultimately, this establishes a new set of normative community expectation within which our communities—and our libraries—can thrive." (Friedenwalk-Fishman, 2006)

The public must feel that they have a stake in the success of the library, just as the library must be aware of their responsibility to the community. It is important that all sides view this as a symbiotic relationship. In order for this to happen though, libraries must take the first step. They need to get out and really get to know their community. They should find out the needs of the neighborhood and establish the library as a place where all of the people want to gather.

How do libraries go about forming these types of relationships? They do this by finding reasons for the community to come together and celebrate; they make the library the center of the celebration, a symbol of unity and equality for all.



Community Celebrations

America is a land of opportunity and unlimited possibilities. Immigrants have come from all over the world to settle here and with them they have brought their various

ethnic celebrations. In winter there is Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. However, long before these holidays, people were celebrating the changing of the seasons. Santurnalia was an eight-day celebration that began on December 17th. People lit bonfires, houses were decorated, and people sang and danced. All this was to coax the sun to come back. (Sorrentino, 1997)

Again in the springtime there are more celebrations. Here are a few examples, Beltrane (an ancient Celtic celebration), the observance of the solstice by Native Americans, Easter, Passover, Songkran (Thai New Year), and Norooz (Persian New Year). (Redd, 203) The vernal equinox has been celebrated in different ways for thousands of years. "Before Christianity, the Saxon people paid tribute to the goddess Eastre. Legend has it that she was saved by a bird that froze in the cold of winter. The freezing turned the bird into a hare. This hare could lay eggs." (Register, 2006)

Does all of this sound familiar?

While the celebrations may be different, one thing remains the same. All people regardless of their backgrounds are subject to the change of seasons. This is one of the common threads that bind us all, and this is why I think that libraries should plan their promotions around the seasons. While libraries have many promotions I would propose that they have four major ones per year. This would give a chance to update the bulletin boards and general décor to correspond to the season. Various groups could showcase those items or events that define their heritage. Eye-catching displays provide opportunities to showcase new acquisitions and programs that the library is promoting.

While each of the seasons provides a myriad of opportunities for promotion; I would like to focus on spring and the title of my promotion is, "See Yourself at the

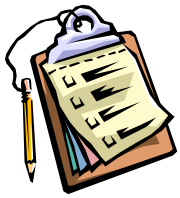
Library”. The purpose of this program is to create an atmosphere where people feel welcome and feel they are a part of the library family. It is important that all members of the community feel that they belong at the library.

See Yourself at the Library

The focus of this promotion would be a large area in the entry titled, “Wall of Distinction”. Under this would be the caption, “See Yourself at the Library”. Under this caption would be collage of pictures of patrons, library staff, library activities and community groups. There would be a flyer encouraging people to donate a picture or come into the library and have their picture taken with their favorite book. (See attachment after Reference page) The kick off for this promotion would be a celebration on the Saturday closest to the Vernal Equinox, marking the arrival of spring, and showcasing the various ways different members of the community celebrate the season. An unveiling of “Our Wall of Distinction” would be set for this day. Up until this point the wall would have been covered with a large cloth while staff worked on the construction.

In order for this to be successful, it is imperative that the library gets out and makes contact with the community. The key to success will be that everyone feels included and wants to see their picture or their group’s picture on the wall. Representatives of the library need to go out and canvas the neighborhood. While this will require an investment of staff time, I believe the benefits will prove substantial.

Here are just of few of the suggestions I have for doing this:



1. Day Care Centers: Drop off flyers. Ask if a picture of the school with the students and teachers could be included on "The Wall".
2. Local Schools: Drop off flyers. Talk with teachers. See if they will partner in the promotion, perhaps even a picture of the class with a banner that says, "See our picture at the Library". Talk to the local high school. Often times their teens are required to perform community service. Let them know that this would be a great opportunity to help out. See if perhaps the band can be persuaded to be there for the unveiling of "The Wall".
3. Retirement Homes and Senior Centers: Drop off flyers. Many retirement homes have buses that shuttle their residents to local events. See if they would be willing to drive residents to the celebration. Take pictures. Encourage seniors to visit the library.
4. Local Businesses: Ask to display flyers in the window. See if they would be interested in contributing anything to the opening day festivities in exchange for acknowledgement of their participation. Ask if they have a picture, or would like to take one, of themselves or their employees in front of their business to put on "The Wall".
5. Local Churches: Drop off flyers. Ask if they would like to put together a collage of seasonal celebrations, featuring their members, to be displayed at the opening. Many churches have teen youth groups that need volunteer hours. See if they might like to help out at the celebration or with one of the programs offered by the library. Often too, churches have

groups that are of a specific nationality. Be sure to include them in the invitation. See if they don’t have something unique to their group that they would like to see on display. Let all members know that you want them to “See Themselves at the Library”.

6. Youth Sports: Little league is big in the springtime. Contact the local group and see if they would like to participate. Most kids would love to see a picture of their team on “The Wall”.
7. Dance Studios: Visit local studios, most would jump at a chance to showcase their talented youngsters. Perhaps they can put on a small show on opening day. Not only will this bring the kids to the library, but also their parents and extended family.
8. Homes for the mentally challenged: Visit and drop off an invitation to visit the library. At a recent visit to the Corona Library, a group of these enthusiastic kids were there visiting the teen room and having a ball. Offer to take a group picture.

These are just a few suggestions on how to include the entire community and make them feel welcome at the library. Every community is unique and I am sure I have left out some obvious suggestions. A browse through the local yellow pages would undoubtedly offer a multitude of possibilities. The goal should be to contact as many people as possible and invite them to be “a part of” the library.

A month or even six weeks before the event, there should be a meeting of all library staff. Before we can understand the diversity that exists in the community, we should get to know and honor the diversity that exists in our own coworkers. This should be a celebration, as much as a meeting, where people share their traditions and talk about what Spring means to them and the way in which they celebrate. People can bring in items to share. This was an experiment of the

Auraria Library and proved to be very successful. They found some similar threads running through their different traditions. (Redd,, 2003)

The next step is to plan the actual celebration. During the survey of the community it is hoped that many of the groups will have been persuaded to participate. The Library Director should schedule the event to start, approximately a half hour before the opening of the library on Saturday with a welcoming speech and pictures. As the doors open, staff should be lined up to greet the patrons and the “Wall of Distinction” unveiled. Easels should be positioned in the entry to showcase any collages that the community has contributed. Hopefully these collages will highlight seasonal celebrations that different groups would like to share. Welcome signs should be posted in various languages throughout the entry and on the windows. These should not be limited to just the major ethnic groups of the area but should be numerous in nature. Think what it would mean to a person to see a welcome sign in the language of his homeland.

There should also be a sign in the lobby inviting people who don’t have a picture on the wall, to have one taken with their favorite book. There should be a table set up near the circulation desk with a staff member and a Polaroid camera to take the pictures. Patrons can then take their pictures and have them added to the entry wall.

In addition I would have a special sign at the circulation desk that reads: "Get your free library card, and start enjoying your library today!" Bookmarks could be handed out that encourage people to "Spring into a Good Book!"

This is also a good time to have a sign up sheet for people to list their email. Once a month the library could send out an email detailing the upcoming events and possible volunteer opportunities. Email has proved a successful way of communicating for libraries. Paul Holdengraber, the Director of Pulbic Programs at the New York Public Library has done away with the old event brochures, in favor of postcards and email announcements. When he started in 2005 there were 400 people on the email list. The number has grown to 8000 at present. (Valdes, 2006) Email is a tool that libraries should use to their advantage.

In addition to the opening day celebration, the library should be ready to "strut its stuff for spring". This is the time to promote special events and new acquisitions. Displays could be set up throughout the library showcasing some of the newest movies, Music CDs, Books on CD, etc. In the newest arrival section have a list of the best sellers and show which ones the library has purchased, what's on order, and ask for suggestions. There should be a suggestion box with a sign that reads:

YOUR OPINION COUNTS!
REMEMBER THIS IS YOUR LIBRARY

Or perhaps:

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

This is also a great time to promote the different programs that the library sponsors. For example, pictures could be set up on easels, showing participants enjoying the different story times that are offered for children. Displays could be consturcted showing children’s books with a Spring or Spring Holiday theme. An effort should be made to see if a variety of Spring Holiday books can be found and not simply the ones that are most common.

For adults the “One Book” movement which began in 1998 in Seattle when Nancy Pearl initiated the program titled, “If All Seattle Read the Same Book” have proven to be immensely popular. ALA has material available on how to start this program in your community. The library should have a book picked out with enough copies on hand for patrons to check out. Some of the most popular titles have been, “Tuesdays with Morrie”, “The Curious Incident of the Night in Night-Time”, “Fahrenheit 451””, The Kite Runner”, To Kill a Mockingbird”, “Peace Like a River”, and “The Color of Water”. (Cole, 2006) I have also been at libraries that sponsored Poetry Groups, Mystery Book Groups, and Business Workshops.

The key is to find out what type of events the community will support and to implement them. Displays could be set up around the library with signs such as:

SEE YOURSELF AT THE CHILDRENS' HOUR

or

SEE YOURSELF AT THE MYSTERY BOOK DISCUSSION

This is also a good time to partner with different community outreach programs and the Friends of the Library. Perhaps the library has rooms that could me made available for literacy programs, senior outreach, ESL programs. The FOL should have a display showing what they have to offer and how people can volunteer their services and become part of the library family. Let people know that their talents would be most welcomed and appreciated. Perhaps a sign that says:

FIND <u>YOUR</u> PLACE AT THE LIBRARY

For this day, there should be extra staff on duty to give tours of the library for those who are here for the first time. The goal is to make people feel at home, to make them want to come back to the library.

Conclusion

A library has a distinct roll to play in a community. Not only should it be a place where people come to find books and information, but also a place of instruction and a place for the community to come together. Libraries teach patrons how to locate information on their own. For some it is the only place that they have access to a computer. For others, it can be a social activity. Places where they can meet with others of similar interest and discuss a particular book or a genre. Libraries promise to provide equal access to information tools that might otherwise not be available. In this case the library is an equalizer. Libraries serve many functions and a diverse clientele. The best libraries will realize that ‘diversity at the library” means serving each person as an individual and realizing that each has special needs. Materials need to be made available in a language that the patron understands. Staff, in an ideal library, would be able to communicate in different languages in order to fully understand the patron’s information needs and to make them feel at home. While we are waiting for that “ideal” library, we can take certain steps to make people feel welcome and comfortable when they visit. Signs and forms can be bilingual and staff can learn key phrases and be willing to use them. Language isn’t the only problem; libraries need to make sure that they are accessible for the disabled. All of these items are things that libraries should be doing to serve their diverse populations.

However, this paper was about seasonal celebrations and in particular the Spring Celebration of “See Yourself at the Library”. I think that one of the most important things a library can do it to bring people together; to help them see the

similarities that each of us share, rather than the differences. Planning promotions around the seasons is just one small way that libraries can do this. People have been celebrating the seasons as far back as we have recorded history. By bringing people together and letting them share their lives, their cultures, their histories; libraries will build a foundation for greater understanding in the community.

The “See Yourself at the Library” campaign is meant to make people want to come to the library to see their picture on the “Wall of Distinction” and to feel “a part of” the library. People can either feel “a part of an institution” or “apart from it”. Libraries belong to all the people and therefore it is the job of the library to make each person feel that it is their library and that they have a stake in its success.

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Join our Wall of Distinction

See yourself at the Library !

Our Patrons are the Best!
Do you have a favorite photo for our Wall of Distinction?
Just leave it at the Reference Desk

If you don't have a picture stop by the Reference Desk and

HAVE YOUR PICTURE TAKEN WITH YOUR FAVORITE BOOK!